

# Traditional Religion and Moral Conscience

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## Abstract

The paper is concerned with traditional religion and moral conscience. It seeks to examine in what way(s) the traditional religion has contributed towards the building of moral conscience. Descriptive research method was adopted for the study. It was found that the traditional religion has contributed immensely towards the building of traditional Africans moral consciences by instilling in the religious adherents the fear of punishment by the spirit beings for any breach of the moral codes which are believed to be not mere human inventions but what have been sanctioned by the deities. It was also found that living a virtuous life is one of the greatest demands on the worshippers for becoming ancestors. The paper recommends that like traditional Africans, people should have objectives for living a moral life; that religious leaders should deemphasize prosperity and emphasize holiness for increasing moral conducts in the society. It concludes that there is a correlation between the traditional religion and moral conscience.

## 1. Introduction

This paper emanates from the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary lecture of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies of the University of Uyo, which had as its theme “Religion, Culture and National Conscience”. The anniversary was marked 5-11 October, 2015. It must be noted that there is no distinction whatsoever between conscience and moral conscience. Both mean one and the same thing. The choice of adding “moral” to conscience is simply because of their close relationship.

Truly, conscience cannot be discussed without reference to morality; because it is the moral principles that inform the conscience of an individual. In other words, our sense of right and wrong stems from the existing social norms as well as the rules and regulations of the land. For instance, if there is no law forbidding stealing, then one may steal without having to think of the consequences.

Morality entails human principles of right and wrong. It deals with how humans treat themselves in order to promote mutual welfare and self-fulfillment in the society. Davis captures this point vividly when he argues that morality is reflected in the conscience of humankind confirmed by the experience of people in all ages. It has to do with the consequences of our actions to ourselves and to others. It recognises that life has an overall purpose and accepts the inner integrity of each individual.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand conscience refers to the sense of right and wrong that governs an individual’s thoughts and actions, urging him or her to do right rather than wrong. Etuk corroborates this when he defines conscience as the sense of rightness or wrongness within an individual which forms the morality of that individual.<sup>2</sup> That explains why when a person behaves immorally we say he or she has no conscience.

Moral conscience is concerned with the issue of good and bad conducts among those who make up the human community. It bothers on the creation of a humane social environment without which those who live in the society would hardly realise their goals and aspirations in life. It is for this reason that people are constantly exhorted to lead morally emulous lives because, as the argument goes, it is in living virtuously that human beings can give meanings to their social lives and existence. With particular reference to traditional African life, it is the opinion that a life of rectitude helps in building up the society and guarantees the individual a good place in life after death. The logic of the belief in life after death notwithstanding, another important issue that bothers on this discussion is that the human community can only function effectively if it is built on a good moral foundation.

In our day-to-day interactions as human beings, we expect people to conduct themselves in a morally acceptable way. Similarly, we also expect a person to do that which is morally good while avoiding that which is bad. When, for instance, we judge the actions and characters of people to be right or wrong, good or bad, just or unjust, etc., it presupposes that we have an idea of the best way we think they can live. While we may define moral behaviour as a behaviour which conforms with the recommended patterns or norms of the community, the morality of the community on the other hand consists of those ways of behaviours which each member of the community is taught and encouraged to adopt.<sup>3</sup> Going by the title of this work, the question that readily comes to the mind is, what is the correlation between the traditional religion and moral conscience? This will be made known in the subsequent discussion.

## 2. Taboos and the Moral Conscience

In the traditional society, the action or conduct of one member of the society can affect the entire society since the system is a communal one. In order to prevent man from becoming rebellious and thus endangering the

welfare of the society, there are set patterns or code of behaviour for members of the community. There are certain standards or norms to be observed. If one observes these norms faithfully, it would be to the good of one and the community at large; but if not, there could be disaster not only for the culprit but for the entire community. These norms and codes of conduct could be seen as moral values.

Basically, in the traditional society, moral values are the products of religion and not mere human inventions. From the beginning, the Supreme Being had impressed His moral principles in man's heart, and had endowed him with the sense of right and wrong – the conscience. Man's conscience has always instructed him that there are certain things which he must not do in order to have peace. Such things which are prohibited and must not be done are called taboos. They are called differently among different communities and languages of Africa. Among the Ibibio they are called *mbubiam*; among the Igbo they are called *nso ala*;<sup>4</sup> and among the Yoruba they are called *eewo*.<sup>5</sup>

Taboos are prohibited actions, the breaking of which is followed by supernatural sanction. In discussing taboos, the term *covenant* is pertinent. Covenant is an agreement between two or more parties, either equal or unequal in status. For instance, among the Itam people in Ibibio, all worshippers of Awa Itam, the deity of the land, do not eat monkey because the deity forbids it. The theological basis for this prohibition is that the monkey is *adiaha* Awa Itam (the first daughter of the deity). Rather than eat monkey as food, the Itam people are expected to revere it.<sup>6</sup> Monkey, therefore, is the people's totem animal. Similarly, among the Yoruba, all the worshippers of Orisa-nla, the arch divinity, do not drink palm wine because Orisa-nla forbids it. The theological basis for this taboo is seen in the tradition that Orisa-nla once became drunk after drinking palm wine, and since then, he would neither drink palm wine nor allow his worshippers to drink it. Orisa-nla, as the divinity of purity, represents the Divine holiness; because of this, he enjoins his worshippers to be perfect and to be without stain. Since palm wine as an intoxicant can affect man's character and purity adversely, he forbids it, and forbids any other thing that can affect man's morality adversely. These prohibitions are regarded as food taboos.<sup>7</sup>

There are also word taboos. In other words, there are certain utterances that a person must not make in a particular community, such as reporting the death of a king bluntly. When the king dies in such community, the death is usually reported in proverbs: it could be said that the king has joined his ancestors; the great iroko tree has fallen, etc. These two taboos are not universal but peculiar to those communities that observe them. However, any breach of them amounts to committing an abominable act and attracts severe sanction to the culprit or to the community at large if not appropriately atoned for.

The preceding taboos are only a prelude to the points the researcher wishes to make which are largely contained in the social or universal taboos. These taboos are universal because they are relevant to people in different cultures and races and affect their relationship with one another. They are believed to have been ordained by the Supreme Being for the good of man. They include the taboos against theft, cheating, adultery, murder and a host of others. For man to have fellowship with the spirit beings and enjoy peace with himself, he must not violate any of the taboos of the land. Any violation amounts to an abomination against the spirit beings. Awolalu corroborates this:

In African communities, there are sanctions recognised as the approved standard of social and religious conduct on the part of individuals in the society and of the community as a whole. A breach of, or failure to adhere to the sanctions is an abomination, and this incurs the wrath of the gods. An abomination is, therefore, doing that which is contrary to the will and direction of the gods. It includes any immoral behaviour, ritual mistake, breach of covenant, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The spirit beings are regarded as the founders and guardians of public norms and morality. To disregard them is tantamount to committing abomination. Likewise to violate the norms of the community is to commit abomination. Apart from the inner peace that would automatically elude a culprit owing to his guilty conscience, he may also bring upon himself, and sometimes other members of his family and the community at large, shame and reproach or the wrath of the gods, such as sickness and disease or the outbreak of an epidemic, drought or famine. Hence in the traditional society morality has a pride of place in the day-to-day life of the people, and each member of the community is concerned about the other members; because what affects one, if care is not taken, could affect all. This is evident in the Ibibio proverb (taken as an example): *nkpo anam enyin anam iwooh* (what affects the eye affects the nose).

Unlike in Christianity where God is presented as a merciful Father that forgives sin, in the traditional religion the Supreme Being repudiates any infraction on His ethical order and punishes the violator. Therefore, in the traditional religion, no infraction goes unpunished; and no culprit can escape the wrath of the deities. Every abominable act, whether committed in the secret or in the open, would be identified by the eagle eyes of the gods and punished in due course. Among the Ibibio, for instance, it is believed that if a married woman indulges in extramarital affair, though she may be lucky she is not caught in the act; however, she would have difficulty in labour and would be forced to confess by the midwives; else *ekpo nkawo* (the ancestral spirits)

would kill her. This belief is held by Ibibio Traditionalists and Christians alike, though there are some Ibibio Christians who say it does not exist in their families.

Similarly, among the Yoruba, when there is a flash of lightning and a crash of thunder, the people are constantly reminded of the presence of the god of justice, Songo. Those who committed any crime secretly and those who are not sure of their character usually tremble with fear. Also if lightning strikes a man or his house, he or his very close relative is sure to have done something wrong that has not been confessed or atoned for. Until the thunderbolt, called *edun ara*, is dug up and removed from the spot, the residents of the house would not sleep in the affected house but would find temporary shelter in a smithy or under booths. In the event of death, the victims of Songo do not receive normal burial since such death is considered a bad death. They can only be buried by the priests of Songo. Rituals are usually performed on that fateful spot where they died by the priests of Songo. Punishment by Songo is regarded as a royal punishment; therefore the victims must not be mourned. It is believed that the victims are rewarded for their evil deeds since the descent of Songo never occurs except to show his displeasure against those guilty of perjuries and misconducts.<sup>9</sup> In addition, among the people, smallpox disease is seen as punishment by Sopo, the god of smallpox. Like Songo, Sopo forbids lying, poisoning and bad magic, and his punishment (smallpox) is regarded as a royal punishment which must be accepted with cheerfulness. Thus when someone dies of smallpox people do not mourn. The victim's property are usually confiscated by the priests of the deity and the corpse is buried in the evil forest. However, the cult of the deity was prohibited in 1917 because it was believed that the priests were devising some foul means of spreading the disease in order that they might inherit the property of the victims. But the prohibition had long been set aside as there now abound many of the cults in many places among the people.<sup>10</sup>

Also among most Africans, Traditionalists and other religious adherents alike, sickness generally may be interpreted to have a deep metaphysical cause and not merely the malfunctioning of the body caused by the activities of micro organisms, like medical experts would say. A person suffering from a terrible illness that cannot be cured may be thought to have committed an abomination secretly which has incurred the wrath of the Supreme Being, the divinities or the ancestors, and is therefore facing the consequences of his misdeed. This is one way of interpreting sickness in Africa. The other way of looking at it is that the sufferer may be suffering from the sickness which has been inflicted on him by an enemy, such as witches, wizards or a sorcerer. Therefore in the traditional religion, people endeavour to do good and to live a morally good life, not just for fear of punishment by the spirit beings, but also in order to be admitted into the company of the blessed departed (the ancestors) in life after death. It is believed that bad people would not be admitted into such company; hence they would become wandering spirits (*ukpakekpo*, in Ibibio term), wandering between this world and the spirit realm. Therefore living a virtuous life in the traditional religion is a necessary condition for becoming an ancestor. The following are some divinities that are directly concerned with morality among a few tribes in Nigeria: Abuma, the thunder divinity among the Ibibio that punishes with lightning who is known as Songo among the Yoruba and Amadioha among the Igbo. Others are Ala, the earth goddess and guardian of morality among the Igbo, Orisa-nla, the god of purity, Sopo, the god of smallpox and Iyelala, the queen of justice among the Yoruba.

### 3. Conclusion

From the foregoing, suffice it to say that morality is ingrained in the consciences of traditional Africans. And the people would always strive to do what is good and desirable and eschew what is bad and undesirable for fear of punishment by the Supreme Being, the divinities and the ancestors who are the custodians of public norms and morality. Apart from the fear of punishment by the spirit beings, a traditional African would always endeavour to live a morally good life which is a major requirement for becoming an ancestor; and that is the goal of every traditional African.

### 4. Recommendations

- i. Like traditional Africans, we should endeavour to live a morally good life for an objective, such as for the fear of God, or for the fear of retribution or nemesis.
- ii. Our religious leaders should lay emphasis more on holiness rather than on prosperity which is very prevalent these days.
- iii. Societal values should be redefined to include men and women of noble character, and such people should be revered and celebrated regardless of their educational status. This will motivate people to do good.
- iv. Just like we have days for virtually everything of interest, the United Nations can as well set aside a day to awaken or promote moral conscience and good conducts among people.
- v. Also, moral education should be included in schools curricula.

### Notes and References

1. Keith Davis, *Human Behaviour at Work* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw Hill Publishing Company Limited, 1982), p.13.

- 2.U. Etuk, “Religion, Culture and National Conscience” (A paper presented at the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Lecture of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Arts, held at the town campus of the University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria, 7-11 October, 2015), p. 3.
- 3.Christopher Agulanna, “Moral Thinking in Traditional African Society: A Reconstructive Interpretation”, *Journal of Philosophy and Religion*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (January-June 2007), 77.
- 4.Chike Augustine Ekeopara, *Ethical Order and Stability in Traditional Igbo Society* (Calabar: University of Calabar Press, 2011), p. 107.
- 5.J. O. Awolalu, “Sin and its Removal in African Traditional Religion”, *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (1976), 279.
- 6.Interview with Peace Edet Akpan, a native of Itam, at the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Uyo, aged 30, January 5, 2016.
- 7.J. Omosade Awolalu and P. Adelumo Dopamu, *West African Traditional Religion* (Ibadan: Onibonoje Press and Books Limited, 1979), pp. 211-215.
- 8.Awolalu (1976), p. 279.
- 9.Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), p. 84.
- 10.Awolalu and Dopamu (1979), p. 85.